Social Networking Services:
The New Influence Frontier

By James M. Efaw, Major, USA

Editorial Abstract: With the advent of Web 2.0 and persuasive applications within Social Networking Services such as Facebook, there exists a huge untapped potential for influence operations. Additionally, there exists millions of Muslims, often living in non-Muslim countries or housed in our U.S. universities, which comprise a silent majority who are against terrorism. This paper ties together new technology and the Muslim majority and suggests a tool through which we can influence Muslims and encourage them to take a more active involvement against terrorism.

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In a recent speech at the Washington Institute, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman, outlined goals and the way forward for "Winning the War of Ideas." This article highlights portions of Undersecretary Glassman's speech, and offers a method and a tool to move this plan forward. Additionally, it provides corroborating data on why and how the tool will work.

In the text of Glassman's speech he states: "Here is our ultimate goal: A world in which the use of violence to achieve political, religious, or social objectives is no longer considered acceptable; efforts to radicalize and recruit new members are no longer successful; and the perpetrators of violent extremism are condemned and isolated." He goes on to offer several ways to achieve this goal. "We achieve our desired goal by offering, often in cooperation with the private sector and using the best technology including Web 2.0 social networking techniques, a full range of productive alternatives to violent extremism." The tool proposed here meets this intent: persuasive interactive applications (Web apps), offered to the millions of people around the globe utilizing social networking services. For the purposes of discussion, I refer specifically to the social networking platform, *Facebook*, as the leader in user-generated interactive applications. However, user created and distributed applications will soon cross over to the thousands of social networking sites such as *MySpace, Oracle, Plaxo, Viadea, XING* and more.

The world continues to move towards increasingly decentralized organizations, that move freely and with little structure. As a result, when bureaucratic institutions try to keep up or defeat a decentralized organization, they are often doomed to failure. As the Tofflers explain in *Revolutionary Wealth*:

Terrorist organizations are designed to run rings around bureaucracies. Comprising tiny, loosely networked cells whose members know the identity of one or two other people, most can make decisions quickly, are trained to hit, run and vanish—or blow themselves up. Compared with the Department of Homeland Security, Al-Qaeda is flat as a pancake. And its members don't belong to civil service unions. (p. 232)

However, with one decentralized organization such as those within on-line social networking—combating a decentralized enemy group—the War of Ideas is on level ground. Daniel Kimmage of the *New York Times* would disagree; he feels we are not on level ground, but that in the Western world the advantage has shifted to us—particularly if we take advantage of our strengths in the area of social networking. In a 26 June 2008 article, he writes:

When it comes to user-generated content and interactivity, Al Qaeda is now behind the curve. And the United States can help to keep it there by encouraging the growth of freer, more empowered online communities, especially in the Arab-Islamic world. If Web 1.0 was about creating the snazziest official Web resources and Web 2.0 is about letting users run wild with self-created content and interactivity, Al Qaeda and its affiliates are stuck in 1.0.

Kimmage continues:

Try to imagine Osama bin Laden managing his Facebook account, and you can see why full-scale social networking might not be Al Qaeda's next frontier. It's also an indication of how a more interactive, empowered online community, particularly in the Arab-Islamic world, may prove to be Al Qaeda's Achilles' heel. Anonymity and accessibility, the hallmarks of Web 1.0, provided an ideal platform for Al Qaeda's radical demagoguery. Social networking, the emerging hallmark of Web 2.0, can unite a fragmented silent majority and help it to find its voice in the face of thuggish opponents, whether they are repressive rulers or extremist Islamic movements.

This ability to bring together the silent majority to find a voice is exactly what Undersecretary Glassman refers to when he states:

We seek to build countermovements by empowering groups and individuals opposed to violent extremism--movements (using both electronic and physical means) that bring people together with similar, constructive interests, such as mothers opposed to violence (built on the MADD, or Mothers Against Drunk Driving, model), believers in democratic Islam, even electronic gaming.

The user-generated applications in networks such as *Facebook* go beyond simple social networks however. As BJ Fogg, Stanford professor, author and teacher of the course "The Psychology of Facebook" states, *Facebook* "allows ordinary people to create apps and distribute them through social networks online." (p. 2) However the applications for social networking services are not simply fun games and information: they

Tag Cloud. (Markus Angermeier, Wikimedia)

are designed to influence and persuade. Fogg notes "the creator of the experience intends to make an impact on peoples' lives. For example, a political party could design an experience to win support for their candidate by asking people to watch a video online and then to add their name to a public petition." (p. 4)

Does this fit in with Glassman's concept? Yes.

Our role is as a facilitator of choice. Mainly behind the scenes, we help build networks and movements -- put tools in the hands of young people to make their own choices, rather than dictating those choices. Again, in the words of the National Security Strategy: 'Freedom cannot be imposed; it must be chosen'.

Glassman's expression "Facilitator of Choice" resonates with Thaler and Sunstein's recent book *Nudge*, they refer to "choice architects" who have the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions." A choice architect steers people's choices while still allowing the people total freedom to choose. However, in the context of this freedom to choose, a choice architect can give the user a "nudge," which Thaler and Sunstein explain is 'anything that alters people's behavior in a predictable way.'

Nudging through choice architecture is exactly what *Facebook* applications do. These applications use a wide variety of very effective social psychology influence and persuasion tactics including, but not limited to: anchoring, availability, feedback, representativeness, status quo bias, social comparison, compliance, ingratiation, spotlight effect, path of least resistance, simple choices, incentives, and cooperation. This ability to "nudge" utilizing user-generated applications within social networking services is central to what BJ Fogg terms 'Mass Interpersonal Persuasion' (MIP). MIP ties together everything discussed thus far, and offers even more. In Fogg's, paper *Mass Interpersonal Persuasion: An Early View of a New Phenomenon*, he explains MIP has six components working together in harmony: Persuasive Experience, Automated Structure, Social Distribution, Rapid Cycle, Huge Social Graph and Measured Impact.

The Persuasive Experience

The Persuasive Experience involves the use of persuasive applications discussed earlier and Fogg defines it as "An experience that is created to change attitudes, behaviors, or both." (p. 4) Automated Structure is also key for two reasons. First, the persuasive application is always there in the social networking service. The system will convey the persuasive experience at the same time, every time, repeatedly. Second, the Automated Structure makes it easy for the user to accept and distribute persuasive applications (humans are proven to be cognitively lazy). However, as Fogg states, "If a task seems simple to us—like clicking a mouse once or twice—we are likely to do the task right away." (p. 6) This is exactly *Facebook's* persuasive application design—one mouse click lets the user accept the application, and a second click allows the user to distribute to friends. This leads directly to Social Distribution. Once a user has accepted a persuasive application, that friend can then easily invite other friends to join.

Why would someone download and/or pass on an application in *Facebook*? The answer lies in the inherent trust and credibility that the site offers. No one can see another person's *Facebook* page, unless that person gives them permission by inviting them to be a "friend." As a result, the social networks are made up of people the user has hand-selected *and implicitly trusts*. Al Qaeda has figured this out on a limited scope. They have a small, but powerful, password-protected social networking-type site. A 24 June 2008 *Washington Post* article explains the Al Fajr Media Center linked dozens of webmasters around the world in a heavily decentralized network. This network receives and distributes propaganda from extremist groups around the world. The nature of the network lends itself to high reliability, consistency and authenticity amongst contributors and users. The basic principles hold true on a larger scale within the walls of a high-trust environment of social networks such as *Facebook*: growth can be exponential and quick. It is not unlike the effect described in old shampoo commercial: "…and she tells two friends, and so on, and so on and so on."

Fogg refers to such quick growth as Rapid Cycle, and the exponential growth as Huge Social Graph. Because of the simplicity of accepting and distributing persuasive applications within *Facebook,* an application can spread rapidly. When it starts to spread rapidly, other users notice and want to join in (social comparison), which as Fogg observes: "momentum sweeps many people into a movement who may otherwise not get involved." (p. 7) Huge Social Graph is what Fogg refers to as "a network of millions of people

Personal Digital Assistants are ubiquitous. (Royal Irish Regiment, MOD UK)

connected to one another." (p. 8) In the Al Fajr Media Center network example above, there is a social network—but it is very limited in its scope. *Facebook* has over sixty million users, *MySpace* nearly 120 million users and *Yahoo* (which is not yet ready to connect their social networks) has over 250 million users. Fogg predicts "Persuasive experiences of the future will almost certainly be able to jump from one social graph to another. For example, a movement supporting Burmese monks may start in *Facebook*, but then be ported to other social networks such as *Bebo* and *Hi5*." (p. 8)

Finally, MIP has Measured Impact. In influence operations, effectiveness is generally one of the hardest components to measure. However, most platforms such as *Facebook* have built-in measurements. Right now any *Facebook* user can right now see how many people have downloaded what application, how many people have used it on a given day and how many of your "friends" have the application. This Measured Impact allows social comparison, helping build the momentum discussed previously. Additionally, the Measure Impact allows persuasive application creators to fine-tune the persuasive experience, based on feedback they receive.

A key to our success in this area is to first develop an appropriately powerful persuasive application that will resonate with the target audience, and second to get the application launched and picked up within the desired social network. Then, we watch as it takes off. Some may not want to release this control, but that is the beauty and power of decentralization versus bureaucracy. Some may not want to put these applications in the hands of "amateurs" to propagate. However, the applications gain credibility by doing exactly that. As Glassman states, "It is the fact that the battle is going on within Muslim society that makes our role so complicated and that requires that we ourselves not do much of the fighting. The most credible voices in this war of ideas are Muslim." These applications are a tool to *put those voices into the credible mouths*.

Glassman goes on to list five focal points of the program—three of which we can incorporate into this initiative: Muslim society, especially involving young people, at the grassroots; Middle East elites, who involve themselves in ideology and religious doctrine; and private sector expertise. Starting with the latter element first, private sector expertise could be any of the social networking sites that allow user-generated applications. However, the real expertise needed lies in the realm of designing and launching the persuasive applications, in order to achieve the

Soldier exploits social networking tools. (US Army)

desired effect and to the desired target audience. Technically, many private sector companies with experience in persuasion and influence—as well as some computer savvy—could contribute. However, BJ Fogg and his Stanford Peace Innovations (SPI) is a natural fit for this union. As their website (http://peace.stanford.edu/) states, "At Stanford, our goal is to help people use new technology to invent peace." (Of course, to keep abreast of the progress of this innovation, one can join their *Facebook* Group.) It is noteworthy that the leader of SPI has consulted for *Facebook*, runs a Persuasive Technology Lab, and teaches

courses at Stanford involving persuasion, *Facebook*, psychology and peace.

This initiative could definitely reach Muslim youth and the Middle East elites. While it is common knowledge that Internet penetration is weak in the Middle East, people often overlook the large Muslim populations that live in areas of high Internet penetration. As Toffler and Toffler state:

Today fully a third of all the world's Muslims live as ethno-cultural minorities in non-Muslim countries, increasingly distanced from Islam's geographical center. They include a floating, on the move population of middle-class Muslims intellectuals, businesspeople, engineers and professors who may work and live in a sequence of different countries as they pursue the job market. Oliver Roy of the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris contends that world Islam will be increasingly influenced in terms of ideas, politics, lifestyle, culture, identity by what he calls Islam's "de-territorialized" *millions, largely based in Europe.*

We already have a starting point for launching this initiative, as an informal network already exists. Glassman proposes an idea that dovetails nicely. He recommends "a far more robust alumni network—encouraging Internet-based social networking among the one million alumni participants in educational and cultural exchange programs. If they wish to help, these alumni will be credible voices, pushing back against violent extremism and offering alternatives." A simple search would quickly identify existing alumni already on sites such as *Facebook,* and we could employ a variety of techniques to encourage current participants in our education and cultural exchange programs. However, I would guess most of current exchange students already are already on *Facebook*. Additionally, a number of Muslims in US universities which are not part of any official programs could also form a core of Glassman's "network."

If this program takes off, it is likely that more will happen than the target audience signing petitions or coalescing into an online vocal majority. Research on

"foot-in-the-door" persuasion techniques document that when a person agrees to a small request, such as downloading an application or signing a petition, they are then more willing to agree to a larger requests at a later date. Research shows that this phenomenon even works over the Internet. One could easily imagine a scenario in which a Muslim spokesperson or leader makes a small act of commitment, such as signing a petition and forwarding it to friends within the trusted confines of his social network. As a result, he is more willing to make a public statement and stand or engage in a counter-propaganda like Dr. Fadl, as Mr. Glassman cites in his speech. Additionally, one could imagine a time in the future, when we are not the ones creating the applications and launching them into user groups—but users in the groups we have encouraged to form are developing and distributing the persuasive applications themselves. A definite advantage of the user-populated applications is just that: they are user-generated. The 14 July 2008 edition of *Newsweek* relays:

A YouTube *spokesperson stated that 10 hours of video are uploaded onto* YouTube *every minute. This is the equivalent of 57,000 full-length movies every week. This translates into dollars and work the company does not have to generate. The* FunnyOrDie *site CEO estimated their 10,000 hours of video would translate to about US $8 billion if produced at the "inexpensive" industry rate. So not only is the program efficient and persuasive—it is cost effective.*

Several different agencies and organizations already have systems in place to serve as a launch place. However, rather than list them here, I will distribute this article, and let our own informal, slow-moving social network churn until the article gets into the proper hands.

An Approach

Certainly, there are many ways to approach this opportunity: one would be as follows:

1. Identify the target area of influence (TAI) (for example, Muslims that are anti-terrorism).

2. Begin liaison with private industry to develop persuasive application in the target area, or identify a small team to train on development of persuasive applications.

3. Identify alumni of US State Department cultural and educational programs, as well as current enrollees to would form the initial Target Audience in the TAI.

4. Conduct a search to see which members of the Target Audience are part of online social networking services.

5. Determine the method of launching persuasive application to the Target Audience.

6. Monitor progress of the application for Measures of Performance and Measures of Effectiveness, and adjust persuasive applications as necessary.

7. Over time, based on the monitoring of the Target Audience participation in the persuasive applications, approach active individuals to take on a more public and involved role—such as speaking out (or whatever the desired action).

Regardless of whether readers follow the seven steps outlined above, or some other variation of a program, members of the influence community must get involved such initiatives *now*. Persuasive application within social networking services has exponentially more potential than websites, blogging, instant messaging, or any other Web initiative in which the influence community may, or may not, be involved. Social networking services are an integral part of millions of peoples' daily lives, and the propagation and use will only continue to grow. What I propose here is not "the wave of the future" or a "passing fad." It is now, and it here to stay.